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Author: Paola Luptak

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KING FRANCOIS I AND
THE FRENCH RENAISSANCE

by

PAOLA LUPTAK

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The Renaissance marks the beginning of the transition from the medieval to the modern world view. The medieval times, generally called the Middle Ages, is customarily known as the time between the 500's-1300's, although no historian is able to give the exact dates. These times were characterized by wars and famine throughout Europe. Other prominent characteristics of the Middle Ages were strong emphasis on religion, gothic art works, and the lack of education for the majority of the people.

The Renaissance is the French word for "rebirth". However, one could better describe it by saying it was the birth of a different set of ideals, beliefs and goals. The Renaissance began in Italy in the 1300's. It was the source for the development of Humanism in paintings, sculptures and writings. It also changed the values of the people from religious to secular. Italy was the first country to advance in the Renaissance. The Renaissance revitalized Italy and gave her new world-wide recognition.

During Italy's rapid development into the Renaissance, France still was in the Middle Ages. The French people were aware of Italy's modernization, yet had no desire to adopt these new ways for themselves. The people of France seemed to be content with living in the Middle Ages, while their neighbor, Italy, was establishing its country as a major force in bringing the Renaissance to Europe. In France there remained a languishing echo of the Middle Ages.¹ It was self-evident if the Kings of France were determined to ignore the Renaissance, the people of France would overlook the importance and impact of the early Renaissance.

King Francois I was the principal influence in bringing the Renaissance to France and was known as the "Sun King" of the late 16th Century.² Francois came to the throne in 1515 when France still was in the Middle Ages. Francois savored life and had a flair for living to the fullest. He was a connoisseur of the arts and felt that they should be a predominant part of the lives of the people of France. Francois felt that it was his responsibility, as King of France, to bring the Renaissance to France. He regarded the Renaissance as the major force that could strengthen France both culturally and economically. He witnessed how the Renaissance brought forth a remarkable strength in Italy and desired to have that same strength or even a greater strength to be brought to France. It was Francois' gregariousness, worldly, well-rounded personality that was the main influence in bringing the Renaissance to France. Francois' ideals were unlike that of any of his fellow countrymen. He was a symbol of the Renaissance.³

Francois was devoted to France and the people of France and his every effort reflected this devotion. Francois was determined to have France catch up with the rest of Europe, especially Italy, in modernization. Culturally, France was lagging behind Italy and the emergence of the Renaissance was the stimulus for France to begin its rise in status. Francois could not be a proud ruler knowing his country was not respected and admired by the rest of Europe.

The inspiration for Francois to bring the Renaissance to France was his love of Italian culture, derived from his ancestry and his personal interest in Italian history. His mother, whom he loved and to whom he was genuinely devoted, told him of the great

importance of the arts and that it was his responsibility to lead France to the forefront in this area. Francois' sister, Marguerite, was dedicated to Humanism and literature.⁴ Francois' children were raised under her influence in an environment of art and social graces.

Not only did Francois' family reflect the desire to introduce the Renaissance to France but his court also reflected the importance of this new era. Before Francois' reign, the courts of the Kings of France were crude and arrogant.⁵ However Francois would not tolerate such behavior. He insisted on a court that was refined and he placed great significance on the development of etiquette. Francois used Castiglione's book, The Courtier, as a model for the ideal court.⁶ He ordered Castiglione to translate the book into French so that it could be adapted by his court. Francois put great emphasis on this book, and therefore it was widely accepted and respected. His court was transformed into men of noble attitude and rich dress, unlike the past courts. This was a court that the King could be proud of, and could be used as an example for courts in other countries. The men who made up Francois' court had to be devoted to the arts and literature since the court was the center of influence to the people on arts and the importance of learning. The court of Francois seemed to be a major force in bringing the Renaissance to France.

Although Francois desired the Renaissance to come to France, without Italy's development of the Renaissance, there would be no source for the French Renaissance. Francois concluded that Italy was the key to the French Renaissance, and he realized that he must import it to France no matter how high the price. Francois decided that the only way to bring the Renaissance to France was to conquer

Italy and bring the spoils to France. He did this through the French Italian wars. To Francois, Milan was worth any price; it was his heritage. The City of Milan came into the Valois family, his mother was a Valois, generations before and was lost during subsequent wars. Thus Francois perceived Milan as rightfully his.⁷ Francois personally led the first battle for Milan because of his deep family involvement, and he won a big victory. He viewed the victory as a reclaiming of Milan for his family and a victory for France.

The Swiss were a problem for Francois in his Italian military campaigns. He was forced to fight them to reach Milan, and once there he recruited them as mercenaries to fight for Milan. He bribed the Swiss with money and territory. Francois gave the Swiss all the precious metals and stones in his camp in exchange for their military support, but not loyalty.⁸ After Francois captured his beloved Milan, he had the most important possession he needed to begin the great French Renaissance.

The Italian Popes contributed to the introduction of the Renaissance to France. France was a Roman Catholic country and Francois was a deeply religious Roman Catholic. The Reformation, headed by Martin Luther, threatened the Roman Catholic Church in France, but Francois made compromises with the Pope and then rejected the Reformation. The Pope bestowed many Italian treasures and help to Francois for his loyalty to the Church.⁹ Since the Vatican was so wealthy, the Papal art collection was greatly endowed, reflecting the best of the Italian Renaissance. This quality of art was just the thing Francois desired for France. Francois' deals with the Pope gave France the military and cultural support it needed.

Italy and the Renaissance were so important to Francois that he sent a full-time staff of agents to Italy to find great art treasures or simply to monitor the development of the Italian Renaissance. Francois concluded that the only way to bring the Renaissance to France and the French people was to go out and get it himself through war.

Francois was a "symbol" of the Renaissance because he was totally identified with the Renaissance. The famous chateau Fontainbleau is the primary symbol of the Renaissance created by Francois. It was the most magnificent structure in France prior to Versailles. Fontainbleau was an old, run down chateau that Francois remodeled to exemplify the Renaissance. It was called the "new Rome" by many notable people of the world.¹⁰ It was a mixing of cultures that had never been attempted before. Fontainbleau reflected the Italian Renaissance, but it also revealed the new style of the French Renaissance. Fontainbleau was in a sense Francois' goal and dream, which miraculously came true. Although Francois had many chateaux, Fontainbleau was the true home of Francois. He spoke of Fontainbleau as "chez moi".

Francois was not only interested in introducing Italian art to develop the Renaissance: he also longed for the time that the art of the Renaissance would be genuinely French. For this reason and his desire to educate people, Francois developed the School of Fontainbleau. He was the supreme source of patronage, outside of the Vatican, in the Renaissance.¹¹ Francois tried desperately to bring artists (painters, sculptors, etc.) of the Renaissance to France. He expressed interest in Michelangelo, but Michelangelo declined his invitation to come to France. Because of Michelangelo's rejection of France,

Francois began to show interest in an Italian painter named Leonard Da Vinci. Francois was so pleased when Da Vinci accepted his invitation to study and work at the School of Fontainbleau, that Francois made Da Vinci First Painter, Engineer and Architect to the King.¹² Francois sincerely respected Da Vinci. In Francois' opinion, Da Vinci knew just about everything, which was probably true. Francois was quickly impressed by Da Vinci and learned to love his art, science and judgment. Da Vinci brought such treasures to France as the "Mona Lisa" and The Virgin and Child with St. Anne" to France. Da Vinci was so loved by the King that he died in the King's arms.¹³

Other great painters studied at the School of Fontainbleau. Del Sorto was an inspiring young painter who came to Fontainbleau for his work expression. But unlike Da Vinci, Del Sorto squandered the King's money and eventually returned to Italy with Francois' knowledge, never to return to France again. Raphael also was an Italian painter for Francois at Fontainbleau and he gave France such treasures as the painting of the "Holy Family".

The new architecture of the Renaissance also was prevalent at Fontainbleau. Two ingenious architects, named Rosso and Primatic, designed Fontainbleau. It was inspired by the Vatican, but was a mixture of the Gothic times and the Renaissance.¹⁴ It had floors of marble and parquet and gardens that were designed and planted as if they were precise oil paintings. Fontainbleau has a double staircase that could have been numbered among the world's miracles.¹⁵

Fontainbleau did not limit art to paintings and architecture. Fontainbleau introduced words to music, whereas formerly music was expressed by instruments and rarely sung. Literature was very important to Francois. At Fontainbleau, there was an extensive library of

Over 3,000 books. They were both old and new books of diverse languages and types.¹⁶ Francois also created the Royal Public Library for any scholars to use. In 1517, he gave the title of Chancellor of Literature to Erasmus and set up the College de France for scholars to continue to further their studies.¹⁷ Those educational opportunities were different from any available before, since they combined languages and cultures into one educational opportunity.

There was the development of certain techniques at Fontainbleau. For example, mannerism, which is a characteristic of the Renaissance, was developed further at Fontainbleau. Also, one finds stucco and spiral staircases, yet the most significant technique used at Fontainbleau was the mixture of the Italian Renaissance and the French Gothic style, which was something that had never been done before. Another example of the Renaissance art is "miniature portraits".¹⁸ They were portraits, but extremely small and delicate.

Fontainbleau is unquestionably a world wonder, and the main gallery is unmistakably unique. It is a formal room for displaying art. The gallery took seven years to build. The walls are lined with tapestries and paintings, and one is unable to know where to look first since the beauty and wonderment of the room overwhelms ones senses.

Fontainbleau is a place where great artists came to learn and to teach. It was a place where diversity of art was as great as diversity of educational experiences. Fontainbleau is respected throughout the world as a milestone in the development of the Renaissance, containing one of the greatest art collections in the world. It is understandable that this monument to the French Renaissance

remains a cultural wonder of the world.

The result of the Franco/Italian encounters, through wars and negotiations, was exemplified in the treasures of Fontainbleau which contains the spirit, art, architecture and history of that relationship and sets the future for the culture of France.

Although Francois I conquered Italy through war, Italy conquered France through culture, religion and architecture. Italy revolutionized France without physical invasion and started France's leadership in the arts and culture. The architect for this cultural revolution was King Francois I and his philosophy is expressed in one statement of his: "Take life as a gift, and make of it a thing of beauty."¹⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹Otto Benesch, The Art of the Renaissance, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Printing Office), p. 107.

²Desmond Seward, Prince of the Renaissance, (New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 12.

³Anne Denieul-Cormier, A Time of Glory, The Renaissance in France, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Co., 1968), p. 65.

⁴Benesch, op. cit., p. 108.

⁵Denieul-Cormier, op. cit., p. 113.

⁶Ibid., p. 100.

⁷Francis Hackett, Francois the First, (New York, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968), p. 366.

⁸Seward, op. cit., p. 49.

⁹Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 170.

¹¹Benesch, op. cit., p. 108.

¹²Seward, op. cit., p. 88.

¹³Denieul-Cormier, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁴Seward, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁹Hackett, op. cit., p. 375.

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